

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society, 9/1-2 (1998): 221–229.
Article copyright © 2000 by Peter M. van Bemmelen.

Divine Accommodation in Revelation and Scripture

Peter M. van Bemmelen
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

The concept of accommodation is important for hermeneutics as well as for all other theological disciplines. Though the word is Latin in origin, the concept is deeply rooted in the sacred Scriptures. The ancient Romans used the word accommodation, for instance, in rhetoric to express the idea that an orator would adapt himself to his audience in his choice of words, gestures, and emotions, so that he could move their hearts and persuade their minds in whatever direction he wanted. In a much more exalted sense God in His self-revelation to humanity accommodates or adapts Himself to the mental and spiritual capacity of human beings so that they can come to know Him, learn to trust Him, and ultimately love Him.

In the history of Christian thought the idea of accommodation has played a significant role, even though the word is a theological rather than a biblical term. It has been used in a variety of ways. It must be stated from the outset that the concept of divine accommodation has frequently been applied in a way that did not do justice to the biblical data. This may well be an important reason why the concept has been ignored or avoided by Christian scholars who wanted to remain faithful to Holy Scripture. This, however, is not the right thing to do, as has been well stated by Sweet and Bromiley at the beginning of their article on accommodation in the revised edition of *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. They write:

The subject of accommodation is important because it involves the whole problem of a correct hermeneutics or mode of interpreting Scripture, because it introduces the problem of a correct balancing of the divine and human elements in Scripture, and because it involves the doctrine of the Incarnation and its purpose and nature. In all these spheres there can be a false as well as a true doctrine of accommoda-

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

tion, though the true doctrine is certainly not to be abandoned or neglected because of the possibility of the false.¹

The Concept of Accommodation in the History of the Church

Justin Martyr. With this warning in mind let us look at a few examples of how the concept of accommodation has been applied by Christian thinkers in different periods of the history of the church. Justin Martyr, a philosopher in the second century A.D. who was converted to Christianity, used the concept of accommodation to explain that God through Moses had given to the Jews laws on circumcision, Sabbaths, sacrifices, and many other laws because of the hardness of their hearts.

He wrote that God, “accommodating Himself to that nation, enjoined them also to offer sacrifices, as if to His name, in order that you might not serve idols.”² According to Justin Martyr God did not want the Jews to offer sacrifices, but because of their tendency to idolatry, He accommodated Himself to them by commanding them to bring sacrifices, but only to Him and not to the idol gods. He applies the same argument to God’s command to build a temple for His name in Jerusalem.³ A similar line of argumentation can be found in the writings of other early Christian writers.

Origen. Origen (c.185-c.254) finds divine accommodation in Scripture and in the incarnation of Christ. Because of human weakness, Scripture comes to us in a poor and humble style. But such accommodation is even more true in regard to the incarnation. For Origen, “The incarnate Lord, like the written revelation in inspired scripture, is a veil that must be penetrated. It is an accommodation to our present capacities in this life.”⁴ Several times throughout his writings Origen describes divine accommodation by picturing God as speaking “baby-talk” to us like a father to his little child or like a schoolmaster uses “little language” to his pupils. In his comments on Jer 18:6-10, where it seems that God changes his mind and “repents” of a certain contemplated action, Origen assures us that “when divine providence [*oikonomia*] is involved in human affairs, God assumes human intelligence, manners and language.”⁵

Chrysostom. It seems that of all the church fathers none made so much use of the idea of accommodation or condescension as Chrysostom (c.347-407). Like Origen and others he stressed the fact that God in the plan of redemption accommodated Himself to human weakness. “That he who is God was willing to become man, that he mightily suffered to accommodate himself [*katabnai*] is too

¹L. N. Sweet and G. W. Bromiley, “Accommodation,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (1979), 1:24.

²Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 19 (ANF, 1:204).

³Ibid. 22 (ANF, 1:206).

⁴Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1966), 92.

⁵Origen, Homily 18.6. In Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 1993), 13.

VAN BEMMELIN: DIVINE ACCOMMODATION

great to comprehend.”⁶ Chrysostom highlighted accommodation or condescension in many aspects of Christ’s life and ministry. Other church fathers did so too, but Chrysostom apparently more than anyone else. It must be said that sometimes his application of the concept of accommodation seemed to go beyond or against the clear meaning of the Scriptures.⁷

Calvin. Among the Protestant Reformers John Calvin (1509-1564) stands out for his use of accommodation as a hermeneutical principle and a theological expedient. Like Chrysostom more than a thousand years earlier, Calvin is deeply impressed with the divine accommodation to human capacity and to human lowliness. He sees evidence of this accommodation throughout Scripture. Moses in his record of creation in Genesis made use of accommodation. Observing that Moses does not mention the creation of angels in Genesis chapter one, Calvin explains that “Moses, accommodating himself to the rudeness of the common folk, mentions in the history of the Creation no other works of God than those which show themselves to our own eyes.”⁸

Calvin states here an aspect of accommodation with important implications for biblical hermeneutics, namely that the word of God is often accommodated to the ordinary perception of common people. He sees another example of this in the words of Gen 1:16 that “God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night.” These words obviously refer to the sun and the moon as the two great lights made by God. However, the astronomers of Calvin’s time (long before the discovery of the telescope) had by observation and calculation figured out that the planet Saturn was greater than the moon. Someone could conclude that Moses was mistaken in speaking of only two great luminaries. Calvin explains this as an accommodation on the part of the Spirit of God to common perception. Calvin argues that

. . . since the Spirit of God here opens a common school for all, it is not surprising that he should chiefly choose those subjects which would be intelligible to all. If the astronomer inquires respecting the actual dimensions of the stars, he will find the moon to be less than Saturn; but this is something abstruse, for to the sight it appears differently. Moses, therefore, rather adapts his discourse to common usage There is therefore no reason why janglers should deride the unskillfulness of Moses in making the moon the second luminary; for he does not call us up into heaven, he only proposes things which lie open before our eyes.⁹

⁶ John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* 6.3. In Benin, 69.

⁷ Chrysostom argues, for instance, that God intended for Adam and Eve a state of virginity, that marriage is a divine concession or accommodation to their changed condition after they had sinned. See Benin, 60-62.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1:14:3 (LCC, 20:162).

⁹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1:87.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Lessing. With the rise of rationalism and biblical criticism the concept of accommodation was applied in a way somewhat similar to the way it had been used by some of the church fathers. It was claimed that God had accommodated His revelation to the erroneous ideas and beliefs of more primitive times, but that with the progress of the human race to higher morality and greater scientific knowledge such ideas and beliefs should be abandoned. Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) in his book *The Education of the Human Race*, published in 1780, sees God's revelation through Moses to the Israelites as a moral education "adapted to the age of children, an education by rewards and punishments addressed to the senses."¹⁰ The so-called accommodation theory set forth by higher critics in the late nineteenth century asserted that Jesus Christ in His incarnation accommodated Himself to the erroneous beliefs and misconceptions of His time.¹¹ Such applications of the principle of accommodation had the tendency to discredit this principle in the eyes of Christians who saw it as contradicting the truthfulness of Scripture and consequently the truthfulness of the incarnate Lord. However, it would be a serious mistake to discard a valid principle of biblical interpretation because of its abuse on the part of those who perceive the Bible as full of historical errors and primitive concepts of God and morality. Rather, we should try to ascertain how to distinguish valid from invalid applications. The second part of this paper is an attempt in that direction.

Accommodation: True and False

With some awareness of how the concept of accommodation was applied by Christian scholars throughout the centuries, we now want to look at some specific applications of accommodation. Scripture, we believe, not only is full of such examples but also enables us to distinguish between true and false applications of this principle. It is generally recognized that the Bible often speaks about God in very human terms. Many interesting examples of this can be found in the book of Genesis. In Gen 18:20 the Lord speaks with Abraham about the outcry concerning the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, and He announces his intention in v. 21: "I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know."

These words seem strange in view of the teaching of Scripture that the Lord is omniscient. Was it necessary for the Lord to go down to Sodom and Gomorrah to find out what was happening there; and was it possible that the situation would be different from what He had heard? Or is this an example of divine accommodation, of the Lord acting and speaking at the level of human acting and speaking? If we would conclude from this verse that the Lord was accom-

¹⁰ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *The Education of the Human Race*, trans. F. W. Robertson (London, 1927), 197-198. Quoted in Benin, 203.

¹¹ For examples of this use of accommodation see Peter Maarten van Bemmelen, *Issues in Biblical Inspiration: Sanday and Warfield* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews UP, 1988), 140-141, 235-236.

VAN BEMMELIN: DIVINE ACCOMMODATION

modating Himself by deliberately giving a false impression of His knowledge about Sodom and Gomorrah, would we not make God a liar? This certainly would be in conflict with the fact that Scripture teaches God is truthful and cannot lie (Numbers 23:19). The rest of Genesis chapter 18 is an amazing record of divine accommodation, the Lord opening Himself up to being questioned by a human being. Abraham was well aware of this condescension on God's part, for he said, "I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord," and he addressed God as "the Judge of all the earth" (Gen 18:17, 25). This, therefore, is not an accommodation to a primitive understanding of God, but a confirmation that God is indeed a fair judge—as shown again in Revelation and many other places—who does not act on the basis of hearsay. God knew the true condition of Sodom before He visited Abraham, but as in the last judgment to come, He came to pass judgment in person, thus revealing to Abraham the true source of Sodom's destruction.

Another example of anthropomorphic language in Genesis is found in Gen 9:16, where God speaks about the rainbow as the sign of His covenant. He said to Noah and his sons: "The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on earth." Did God need to look on the rainbow in order to remember His covenant? Obviously not! God couches His promise in very human terms. Ellen White recognizes the divine accommodation in the words of this promise: "The Lord declares that when He looks upon the bow, He will remember His covenant. This does not imply that He would ever forget; but He speaks to us in our own language, that we may better understand Him."¹²

From our brief historical survey it could be seen that the command of God to the Israelites to sacrifice animals was perceived by a number of church fathers as an accommodation to their weakness. Because, in their view, the Israelites were a rude, childlike people, with a strong inclination to idolatry which they had taken over from the Egyptians, God commanded His people to make sacrifice to Him alone, the true God, rather than to the idol gods. Although it is true that the people of Israel were influenced by Egyptian idolatry, it is not in harmony with Scripture to describe the divine laws on sacrifices as an accommodation to the idolatrous tendencies of the Israelites.¹³ Animal sacrifices were of divine institution, given to Adam and his descendants as a means to acknowledge their sin and to express their faith in the Redeemer to come.¹⁴ Genesis

¹² Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 106.

¹³ By contrast, in Ezek 20:23–26 (NASB) God reveals that when the Israelites refused to follow His statutes and ordinances—notice they are His own—He "gave them" statutes and ordinances that were "not good" and human sacrifice: clearly the observances of idolatry, distinct from the Hebrew cultus and a perversion of God's original intent. This is the equivalent of Rom 1:18–32, which reveals of the sufferings of sinners that "God gave them up" to the effects of their sins.

¹⁴ Though to be accurate we must admit that while the Israelite sacrifices pointed typologically to the Redeemer to come and prepared the Israelites for the idea of Christ's death as substitutionary atonement for sin, there is no explicit evidence in the Torah that the Israelites saw or were meant to

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

contains clear evidence that the sacrifice of animals was a common practice in the time of the patriarchs and did not start only at the time of the Exodus. The New Testament clearly explains the typological significance of the sacrificial system as pointing to the sacrifice of Christ. We certainly can see in that system evidence of divine condescension and accommodation, but not merely to the idolatrous tendencies of the Jews, but to the darkened comprehension of the entire human race, separated from God through sin. Some church fathers did set forth the typological significance of the sacrificial system, but quite a number stressed the accommodationist view. Although a number of biblical texts were quoted in support of this use of the accommodation principle, it did not do justice to the totality of the biblical data. In order to prevent faulty or biased applications of accommodation we must bring the fullness of Scripture to bear upon each use of this concept.

Another manifestation of divine accommodation is found in the law of God, the Ten Commandments. It is obvious that the language of His law is accommodated to the sinful condition of humanity. Both in its specifications and in its negative formulas the Ten Commandments are addressed to fallen human beings. Ellen White, in an article entitled "The Law of God," draws attention to this fact. Speaking of the two great principles of the law of Jehovah, namely to love God supremely and to love our neighbor as ourselves, she explains that these principles "were more explicitly stated to man after the fall, and worded to meet the case of fallen intelligences. This was necessary in consequence of the minds of men being blinded by transgression."¹⁵ Again she wrote, "The law of God existed before the creation of man or else Adam could not have sinned. After the transgression of Adam the principles of the law were not changed, but were definitely arranged and expressed to meet man in his fallen condition."¹⁶

It would be a serious mistake, however, to say that the Ten Commandments were especially accommodated to the people of Israel and not to humanity as a whole. Yet, already in the writings of the church fathers we can find indications of such a mistaken use of the concept of accommodation. Justin Martyr, for instance, not only interpreted God's commands to Israel to bring sacrifices to Him and to build a temple for His worship as an accommodation to their tendency to idolatry (as has been quoted earlier), but also argued, "that God enjoined you to keep the Sabbath, and impose [*sic!*] on you other precepts for a sign, . . . on account of your unrighteousness, and that of your fathers, . . ."¹⁷ As proof to sub-

see their sacrifices as pointing to a future event. We find hints of this typological foreshadowing, however, in such texts as Hos 6:6 and Isa 1:10–17. In His death, the Messiah would "bring an end to sacrifice and offering" (Dan 9:27 NKJV).

¹⁵ Ellen G. White, "The Law of God," *Review and Herald*, May 6, 1875. In *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington: Review & Herald, 1953), 1:1104.

¹⁶ Ellen G. White, "The Law and the Gospel," *Signs of the Times*, March 14, 1878. In *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 1:1104.

¹⁷ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 21 (ANF, 1:204).

VAN BEMMELIN: *DIVINE ACCOMMODATION*

stantiate this argument Justin then quotes God's words in Ezek 20:19-26. Clearly, for Justin Martyr the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy was not a commandment with binding force for all humanity, but merely a commandment accommodated to the Jews because they were prone to forget the Lord.¹⁸ This use of accommodation is not in harmony with the teaching of Scripture. While circumcision and the ceremonial or cultic laws were specifically given to the Jews, the moral law as expressed in the Ten Commandments is binding upon every human being. Jesus Christ consistently confirmed these commandments in all His teaching, and so did the apostles. According to Ellen White, God honored the Hebrews at Sinai "by making them the guardians and keepers of His law, but it was to be held as a sacred trust for the whole world. The precepts of the Decalogue are adapted to all mankind, and they were given for the instruction and government of all." In the same context she reiterates the fact that the two great principles of love for God and love for our neighbor in the Ten Commandments "are carried out in detail, and made applicable to the condition and circumstances of man."¹⁹ In other words the law of God was expressed in language peculiarly accommodated to the condition and circumstances of fallen humanity. While the underlying principles of God's law are binding upon all beings created in the image of God, the specific form in which those principles are expressed in the Ten Commandments is adapted not to the holy angels in heaven but to human beings upon this earth.

The climax of divine accommodation to humanity occurred when "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). The apostle Paul refers to the incarnation as the mystery of godliness (Tim 3:16). The entire life and death of Christ was one uninterrupted accommodation to the need and capacity of every member of the human family. If the apostle Paul could say of himself, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22), how infinitely more do such words apply to the incarnate Lord. Christ freely became all things to all men. This wonderful accommodation finds powerful expression in the following words of Ellen White:

As our Example, we have One who is all and in all, the chiefest among ten thousand, One whose excellency is beyond comparison. He graciously adapted His life for universal imitation. United in Christ were wealth and poverty, majesty and abasement, unlimited power and meekness and lowliness which in every soul who receives Him will be reflected. In Him, through the qualities and powers of the human mind, the wisdom of the greatest Teacher the world has ever known was revealed.²⁰

Christ accommodated His teaching to the comprehension of His audience, both in public discourses and in private interviews. With what tact, for instance,

¹⁸ Ibid. 19 (ANF, 1:204).

¹⁹ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 305.

²⁰ Ellen G. White, "Let This Mind Be in You," *Signs of the Times*, September 3, 1902.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

did He adapt His teaching to such different people as Nicodemus, the learned and respected Pharisee, and the Samaritan woman, who seemed to be an outcast even in the opinion of her own people. Christ's lessons, according to Ellen White, "are for all, and adapted to the needs of all," and while they "are clothed in language so simple that a child might understand them, the truth is so deep that the most learned may well be charmed, and worship the Author of matchless wisdom."²¹

Just as with other forms of divine accommodation, it is important that in regards to the incarnation of our Lord we distinguish truth from error. The idea has been set forth that Christ, in becoming a man, accommodated Himself to the limitations of the knowledge of the people of His time. In the oft-quoted words of bishop Charles Gore, Christ "willed so to retain the beams of Deity as to observe the limits of the science of His age, and He puts Himself in the same relation to its historical knowledge."²² Consequently, Christ's statements in regards to science and history might be true in the context of the knowledge of His own time, but could prove to be erroneous in the light of the advanced knowledge of a later age. While Gore stressed the limits of Christ's knowledge in reference to science and history, others see the accommodation of Christ as going much farther than that. It is true that Scripture tells us that "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52), yet there is not the slightest indication in Scripture that He limited Himself to the knowledge of His age. The evidence of Scripture points in a different direction. Christ in every respect, in power, in wisdom, in knowledge, was not only beyond the age in which He lived on earth, but also beyond any age since that time. But He restrained Himself, not sharing more than was essential for the purpose for which He had come, namely, "to save His people from their sins" (Matt 1:21).

To assume that Christ accommodated Himself to the ignorance of His contemporaries or, worse, to their pride and prejudices is in direct contradiction to the testimony of Scripture. He always spoke the truth, because He could say of Himself, "I am the truth" (John 14:6). It is true that He often kept silent when He could have spoken. Even in teaching His disciples He restrained Himself.²³ On the last evening before His death He told them, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." John 16:12. Christ's self-restraint was an important aspect of His accommodation to the weak and limited capacity of fallen human beings.

²¹ Ellen G. White, "Christ's Use of Parables," *Signs of the Times*, November 7, 1892.

²² Charles Gore, "The Holy Spirit and Inspiration," in *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*, ed. Charles Gore (New York: John W. Lovell, n.d.), 301.

²³ See Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press [1900], 1941), 22–23.

VAN BEMMELIN: DIVINE ACCOMMODATION

Conclusion

This paper is not meant as a thorough study of divine accommodation, but as an introduction to an important concept. For a correct understanding of divine revelation and a sound interpretation of the Scriptures, which are the inspired record of that revelation, it is important that we study the concept of divine accommodation. Failure to grasp this concept has often led to wrong interpretations of Scripture and a narrow understanding of the incarnation of our Lord. At the same time we must guard against false applications of this concept which would undermine or distort the truthfulness of God's Word. However, a firm grasp of divine accommodation in the true biblical sense will lead to a correct interpretation of Scripture and a deeper reverence in beholding "the Word made flesh."